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In JFK files, a nervous era

National Perspective

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WASHINGTON – The 800,000 pages of intelligence archive files released this week will tell future historians little about the connection between John F. Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald, but they open a window into the world they shared – and the one that was created when, for a few fateful seconds three decades ago, their lives collided.

Just a day after the secrecy was lifted from the Oswald files, the reading rooms on the second floor of the National Archives were returning to their dusty and sleepy obscurity. The reporters and the camera technicians were mostly gone, along with the hope that the documents in the newly unsealed boxes might help turn the key to the biggest mystery of the postwar world.

But what remained was one of the biggest monuments to an era ever created – page after page of paranoia, Cold War fear, superpower intrigue, agency secrets, inexplicable shards of evidence, enigmatic jottings between typewritten lines.

It was a world where it would have mattered if Oswald had met Fidel Castro's agents in Mexico. It was a world where law-enforcement personnel obtained the obstetrical records of Oswald's wife, Marina. It was a world where sober-minded bureaucrats took seriously the report of a man who had overheard a drunken Communist Party leader in Tulsa, Okla., say that he had learned that Nikita Khrushchev himself once said of Kennedy: "I want him killed."

It was a time when investigators tracked down whether the Soviets

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were running a terrorist training camp in Minsk. It was a time when serious-minded operatives wrote memos on research into the use of LSD and ESP for controlling behavior patterns within the Soviet Union.

It was a time when a letter to Marina Oswald containing a passing reference to a June snowfall in Minsk could raise the question whether the phrase was an espionage codeword rather than a meteorological commentary – and could prompt CIA operatives to remind themselves to check whether it had snowed in Minsk in June 1962, appending five question marks to the query.

It was, in short, a peculiar wrinkle in time in an ever-more peculiar world.

The passing of the Cold War will make the period seem even more inexplicable. Brochures from the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, postcards with an emblem celebrating the People's Choir, paper with the watermark "Trade Union School of Communism," an entry card to Scientific Study Hall No. 1 issued to Lee Harvey Oswald by the Lenin State Library – all these are period pieces, instantly understandable to anyone alive between Korea and Kent State, but likely to be inscrutable to anyone else.

These two countries, Kennedy's America and its dread superpower rival, the Soviet Union, were caught up in what the young president himself once called a twilight struggle, one that warped each other's perspective, judgment and economy. It produced spectacles like a letter, included in the archives, from John A. McCone, the director of central intelligence, avowing that the man accused of killing the president "was not an agent, employee, or informant" of an agency of that president's own government.

And it spawned a virus of conspiracy theories that reflected and, finally, amplified, the fears of the age.

In the files – a time capsule from a troubled time – is speculation that Castro was connected with the assassination, speculation that Oswald was actually John Otto Bridge or maybe Jerry Pellegrino, speculation (from Marguerite Oswald, Lee's mother) that the assassination was actually a conspiracy between two giant Texas retailers, Neiman-Marcus of Dallas and Sakowitz of Houston. Mrs. Oswald was convinced that the merchandisers communicated through ads in the Dallas and Houston papers, arguing that a Neiman-Marcus ad featuring a woman with a pearl necklace and headed, ominously, "The Connecting Link," was confirmation of her theory.

The atmosphere was such that American authorities could examine reports such as one from a horse trainer in Rosecroft, Md., who told the FBI that she learned from a groom of a conspiracy "to take over the world," which led to Kennedy's death. The groom purportedly told the woman on Nov. 22, 1963, that he knew Kennedy would be killed and that the killer would not live to come to trial.

And it prompted investigators to look at a letter Marina Oswald received that included a mysterious passage saying that the "main idea of the play, 'The Man with the Rifle,'

is explained in the words: 'Now we should not be afraid of the man with the rifle.'"

Not that the Americans were the only ones with the theories. Khrushchev told columnist Drew Pearson and his wife that he was convinced that the American right wing assassinated Kennedy. According to a memo: "Chairman and Mrs. Khrushchev could not believe that the affair had happened as it apparently did, and Mr. Pearson made no headway whatever in trying to change their belief that something was not on the level."

What does emerge from the Oswald archives is the suggestion that authorities investigated every conceivable tip, no matter how removed, how remote or how ridiculous. That includes a phone call the wife of a Dallas justice of the peace received from "an unidentified colored man" who had overheard another woman talking to her son-in-law on the phone that suggested, somehow, that the son-in-law had conspired with Oswald.

These investigations found that Oswald's rent at 2703 Mercedes St., was $59.50 a month, not including $12 for utilities, that Oswald cashed a $6 check at an A&P store at 107 East Jefferson St. on Oct. 8, 1963 (but bought no groceries that day), and that Marina Oswald chose to have no anesthesia while giving birth to "one viable living white female" 12 days later. Less than three weeks after the Kennedy assassination, Mrs. Oswald entered Parkland Medical Center for a postpartum examination, which was normal. Secret Service agents accompanied the baby during the examination.

But mysteries remain. Why, for example, are there at least two pieces of paper in the files with simply the number "37" handwritten on them? Is there a secret embedded in the sewing patterns, apparently taken from Mrs. Oswald, that might offer clues to the assassination? What explains the frequency of references to soup (two to chicken, one to kidney soup with salted cucumbers) in the Oswalds' private correspondence? And one more: Did it really snow in Minsk in June 1962?